

Luminous visions and liberatory amulets in Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's Great Perfection anthology

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In Buddhist philosophy, the five senses are generally considered to be deceptive, for they do not reveal reality-as-it-is. Ordinary beings perceive phenomena in dualistic terms, with a fundamental difference between a perceiving subject and perceived objects. In conventional Yogācāra philosophy, sensory perception is tainted by conceptualism, as it is conditioned by imprints in the foundational consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*, *kun gzhi rnam shes*).¹ Since perceptions are filtered by conceptual thought, ordinary sensory perception reinforces a mistaken, dualistic view on reality. One could ask, however: might there be a way to transcend this dualism through the very process of sensory perception? I believe we can answer in the affirmative and can find in various traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism different ways to employ the senses in the project to go beyond dualism.

This paper discusses the role of sensory perception in an indigenous Tibetan tantric tradition, the Great Perfection or *rDzogs chen*, in particular the anthology of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*). The anthology was revealed in 1366 in Byang, Bare Divine Rock (Zang zang lha brag) on the Mountain Resembling a Heap of Poisonous Snakes (sDug sprul dpungs 'dra). It describes a variety of practices and topics pertaining to both the Great Perfection and normative tantra; but what is of particular interest to us here, in the context of examining the role of the senses, are the texts discussing the practice of direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) and the cycle of *The Liberation Through Wearing* (*btags grol*).

¹ Germano and Waldron 2006: 45. For an evaluation of various views on concepts in the Yogācāra, see Sur's 2017 translation of Rongzom's *Entering the Way of the Great Vehicle*: 99–105.

1. *Direct transcendence and its foundation in subtle physiology*

The principal source for the practices of direct transcendence in rGod ldem's anthology is the cycle of *The Oral Transmissions of Padmasambhava* (*Padma'i snyan brgyud*),² although the anthology contains another five texts that discuss the topic.³ The practice of direct transcendence features several techniques that all utilize the sense of vision in the project to attain enlightenment. A yogi may train his visionary ability by gazing at clear blue sky free from clouds,⁴ or impress upon his mind the presence of one's indwelling divinity by looking at images of deities through a crystal.⁵ As an alternative technique, not mentioned in *The Unimpeded Realization*, some Great Perfection texts such as Klong chen pa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings* discuss sensory deprivation as a means of transcending duality, and prescribe that seekers stay in a dark retreat completely removed from light.⁶

The paradigmatic technique of direct transcendence entails gazing at a light source, such as the sun, moon, or a flame. This is described in *The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava, The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled the Letterless Oral Transmission Which Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom*. When a yogi looks at rays of the setting sun by squinting his eyes, he sees circular spheres of light or *bindus* (*thig le*) and luminous chain-like manifestations called the *vajra* chains. After patiently gazing and attending to the *bindus*, they begin to join together, and with sustained practice the phenomena of light form various patterns such as many-eyed designs, nets, lotuses and castles. These in turn transform into faces of deities and eventually into the *maṇḍalas* of the

² Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, *The Unimpeded Realization* (from here on UR) II: 393–459. For an analysis of Padmasambhava's role in rGod ldem's anthology, see Turpeinen 2018: 152–157.

³ These five texts are *The Three Nails of the Key Points - A Guide Text Composed by Vimalamitra* (*Khrid yig gnad kyi gzer bu gsum pa bi ma la mi tras mdzad pa*) UR II: 335–352, *A Guide Text on the Direct Perception of Dharmatā of the Unsurpassed Exceedingly Secret Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po yang gsang bla na med pa chos nyid mngon sum gyi khrid yig*) UR II: 353–392, *The Twenty One Introductions of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po'i ngo sprod nyi shu rtsa gcig*) UR III: 555–564, *The Lamp of Unimpeded Wisdom From the Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa ye shes zang thal gyi sgron ma*) UR IV: 27–58, and *The Secret Lamp: A Text on the Key points of the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (*Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i gnad yig gsang ba'i sgron ma*) UR III: 141–162.

⁴ *Khrid yig gnad kyi gzer bu gsum pa bi ma la mi tras mdzad pa*, UR II: 349.

⁵ *The Twenty One Introductions of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po'i ngo sprod nyi shu rtsa gcig*) UR III: 558.

⁶ Klong chen pa, *Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*): 282.

peaceful and wrathful deities.⁷ This is a process of natural visionary manifestation: no visualization is employed in the practice. After the complete efflorescence of the luminous visions, they subside into emptiness.

In the *rDzogs chen* philosophy of the *Seminal Heart* (*sNyiding thig*) strand, these visions are considered to be one's own projections, or self-display (*rang snang*), inseparable from oneself. Their projection onto the external field of vision is enabled by the subtle energy body and its network of channels and centers. The *Seminal Heart* physiology subscribes to the general ideas of the subtle body in the *Anuyoga* tantras, but with notable additional ideas discussed below. The general tantric theory on the subtle body describes the central energy channel (*avadhūti*, *kun 'dar ma*) that runs along the spine from the groin to the crown. This channel contains several energy centers (*cakra*, *'khor lo*), most notably at the groin, navel, heart, throat and the crown, along with thousands of other channels (*nāḍī*, *rtsa*) that branch off from the energy centers. The channels are conduits for subtle energy or winds (*prāṇa*, *rlung*) and nucleus-like concentrations of energy that have causal potency, or *bindus* (*thig le*). In sum, this network of channels and centers in the subtle body is different from the physical body, but closely related to it as the causal generator of many physical functions.

The *Seminal Heart* innovations concerning the subtle body theory entail positing dual systems of perception that could be called wisdom and karmic networks. The tradition elaborates upon the difference between these networks by describing the distinctive *bindus* flowing in channels within them. Conventional *bindus* that perform activities related to the four elements are of karmic nature, while the wisdom network contains ultimate *bindus* that engender the visions of wisdom, and natural *bindus* that are the wisdom of *dharmatā* (reality-as-it-is) in meditative equipoise.⁸ Another innovative element in the *Seminal Heart* physiology is to locate one's inherent divinity, or buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*, *de bzhin gzhegs pa'i snying po*) in the subtle body of a human being. It is said to reside at the sublime palace of the exalted mind (*tsitta*) at the heart center in

⁷ *Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sum du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po: padma'i snyan brgyud*, UR II: 426, 432–434.

⁸ For subtle physiology, see *Intrinsically Clear Primordial Wisdom - A Commentary on the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection of the Great Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra Transmitted to the King* (also entitled *The Great Exegesis of the Oral Transmission of Vinalamitra*) (*Bi ma mi tra'i snyan brgyud chen mo rgyal po la gdams pa yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i 'grel pa ye shes rang gsal: bi ma la'i snyan brgyud 'grel tig chen mo yang zer*) IV: 253–272.

the form of the *maṇḍalas* of the peaceful deities and at the conch chamber of the brain as the wrathful deities.⁹

In the successful practice of direct transcendence, the *maṇḍalas* of deities flow from the brain and heart centers via a secret, luminous wisdom channel called *kati* or The Great Golden Channel¹⁰ that connects the energetic center of the heart to the eyes. From the eyes, the visions are reflected in the sky to be perceived externally. In contrast, ordinary perception operates via an impure, karmic network of subtle channels. According to *The Oral Transmissions of Padmasambhava*, five of the most important channels connect the central channel to the sense organs, but they “cannot manifest *dharmatā* in direct perception.”¹¹ Thus, the visionary perception of divine forms is based on the alternative wisdom network of perception that overlaps the ordinary organs and channels of perception. An important part of the wisdom network is the tip of the luminous wisdom channel at the eyes called the Far Reaching Watery Lamp (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*).¹² It is a subtle organ of visionary perception, or a wisdom version of the ordinary eye, as it is instrumental in the perception of the visions by the luminous network.

It is notable that *rDzogs chen* philosophy posits a separate organ and network of visionary perception. In the wisdom network, seeing is emphasized over other senses, even though luminous wisdom channels going to other sensory organs are mentioned in the *Seminal Heart* literature. What is special about the sense of vision? Arguably, vision is the most subtle and spiritual sense. It is the only sense not

⁹ *The Second Root Pith Instruction on the Precious Oral Transmission on the Authentic Meaning* (Yang dag don gyi snyan brgyud rin po che rtsa ba'i man ngag gnyis pa) UR II: 398, and *The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled The Letterless Oral Transmission which Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom from the Great Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sum du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po: padma'i snyan brgyud) UR II: 432.

¹⁰ *Rosary of Jewels Tantra* (Rin chen phreng ba'i rgyud) UR III: 120.

¹¹ *Chos nyid mngon sum du gsal bar mi nus so: The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled The Letterless Oral Transmission which Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom from the Great Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sum du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po bzhugs so: padma'i snyan brgyud) UR II: 428.

¹² *Rosary of Jewels Tantra* (Rin chen phreng ba'i rgyud) UR III:90–91 and *The Second Root Pith Instruction on the Precious Oral Transmission on the Authentic Meaning* (Yang dag don gyi snyan brgyud rin po che rtsa ba'i man ngag gnyis pa) UR II: 401, 440.

directly involved with a physical medium of sensation. The eyes can perceive objects across vast distances, which is why the watery lamp of the eyes is called far reaching, seeing even into space or other realms in certain states of visionary perception.

2. *Non-dual perception and the role of vision in direct transcendence*

Within classical Buddhist thought, vision is unique among the senses, and *rDzogs chen* philosophy takes this as a starting point for building an elaborate theory and practice of how to attain enlightenment through seeing. In creating distinct and distinguishable networks of visual perception, the *rDzogs chen* philosophy avoids the Yogācāra dilemma of foundational dualism whereby sensory perception is already tainted by imprints in the *ālayavijñāna*. In the *rDzogs chen* theory of visual perception, only the karmic network is tainted with dualism, while the luminous network of wisdom channels and energy centers presents a possibility of awakened, non-dual perception of reality-as-it-is. Still, one might ask whether this theory of perception implies dualism in itself. Klong chen pa addresses this indirectly by stating that the conventional *bindus* and the lesser meditative attainments they support are not constitutive of the real path, while the ultimate *bindus* are.¹³ Thus, the reality status of the karmic network as conventional, and isolated from the wisdom network, ensures the absence of dualism.

If only the wisdom network is the real path, what exactly is the non-dual perception it can engender? It is the *rDzogs chen* philosophical idea of self-display (*rang snang*) or the perception of appearances as inseparable from oneself, free from the dichotomy of self and other. This form of visual perception amounts to recognition of reality and awakening, just as the Primordial Buddha Samantabhadra recognized the first cosmogonic manifestations arising from the ground (*gzhi*) as not separate from himself.

The *rDzogs chen* concept of creativity or dynamic energy (*rtsal*) is also closely related to the experience of direct transcendence. Creativity is the power driving the visionary manifestations—or manifestation in general—inherent in empty awareness. In ordinary human experience, the functions of creativity have become distorted due to karmic delusion and one perceives illusory appearances of *samsāra*, taking them to be real. As a sign of the potential to transcend this state, one can see *bindus* and *vajra* chains if one gazes at light sources or an empty sky. When the power of creativity is perfected,

¹³ Klong chen pa, *The Treasury of Words and Meanings*: 258–259.

one perceives the *vajra* chains as the *maṇḍala* deities. This concept of creativity is an underlying foundation of the direct transcendence contemplation: the visions manifest due to the intrinsic creativity of emptiness—creative for the very reason that it is saturated with pristine awareness (*rig pa*), another important element of *rDzogs chen* philosophy.

The process of transformation through direct transcendence also reflects the *rDzogs chen* philosophical views on perception. Direct transcendence is essentially a process of radical reconfiguration of one's relationship with the world by using the sense of vision as an instrument. The practice places the self in a creative, participatory relationship with phenomena in which one's patient attention to the external visual appearances triggers fundamental transformation in those appearances as the *bindus* begin to link and transform. This, in turn, causes profound changes in the perceiving subject, as the perception begins to occur via the luminous wisdom network, resulting in the increasing revelation of reality, such as the realization of the insubstantial nature of phenomena, fundamental interconnectedness, fluidity of boundaries and dualistic opposites, "the apprehending subject and apprehended object becoming increasingly diminished"¹⁴ and growing freedom from *saṃsāra*. As this process of perceived interaction of the self and the world continues to unfold, the yogi eventually transcends all dualistic boundaries and attains the awareness and perception of self-display.

The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The Ultimate Letterless within All Oral Transmissions describes some of the attainments associated with the visions:

When you first see drop-like white *bindus* separately, you have seen the intrinsic essence of awareness. When you see connected *bindus*, you have severed the continuity to be born in the lower realms. When you see appearances resembling chains and water pipes, you have departed from the chronic disease of *saṃsāra*. When you see abodes of five-colored light, you will be born in the immaculate *nirmāṇakāya* pure lands. When you see crown protuberances and half bodies of deities, you will attain enlightenment in the *bardo*, or the intermediate state between death and rebirth. When you see perfect bodies of male and female buddhas in union, you will attain enlightenment without abandoning the physical body. At this moment, this very seeing that is clear, unobstructed, and unimpeded is the unmistakable view of the realization (*dgongs pa*) of

¹⁴ *gZung 'dzin je chung je chung la song ba* (*Ye shes mngon sun du bstan pa'i snyan bryud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po*) UR II: 430.

unimpeded wisdom. You have seen bare the quintessential core of the secret *bindu*, the essence of *dharmakāya* awareness.¹⁵

This citation not only illustrates the stages of liberatory attainment that result from the practice, but also highlights the unique role of vision in the practice of direct transcendence: it is the very seeing of these sacred manifestations that causes the realizations of wisdom and increasing freedom from *samsāra*.

Thus, we can observe two ways the sense of vision functions in direct transcendence. First, gazing at appearances is used as a tool along all the stages of practice from the initial manifestation of the *bindus* to the full-blown perception of the *maṇḍalas* and their final dissolution. Upon successful practice, one's gaze becomes such a liberating tool that wherever one looks, everything manifests as *maṇḍalas* of buddhas, and one's gaze has the power to turn one's body into the rainbow light of the five kinds of wisdom. *The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled The Letterless Oral Transmission That Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom* states:

If you focus your consciousness one-pointedly on your hands and fingers, they manifest as rainbow colors, and your body becomes liberated in the manner of rainbow colors.¹⁶

Second, vision is used to describe the ultimate nature of reality: the emptiness of *dharmakāya*, or enlightened realization, becomes visual. These visions are said to be "the *dharmakāya* awareness," so *dharmakāya* is not merely emptiness but is equated with pristine awareness (*rig pa*), and it is visual. The very seeing of the visions is said to be the correct view, so the view of empty awareness or unimpeded wisdom amounts to seeing these visions. However, according to rGod ldem and Klong chen pa, the visions subside into

¹⁵ *Dang po thig le dkar thig thig pa re mthong ba de: rig pa'i rang ngo mthong ba yin: de nas thig le sbrel ma mthong ba dang: ngan song gyi skye rgyun chod pa yin: lcags sgrog dang za ra tshags lta bu mthong ba'i dus na: 'khor ba'i gcong nad thon pa yin: 'od lnga'i khyim mthong ba'i dus na: sprul pa'i shing khams rnam par dag par skye ba yin: dbu'i gtsug tor dang phyed sku mthong ba'i dus na: bar do na sangs rgya ba yin: sku rdzogs pa dang yab yum mthong ba'i dus na: phung po ma bor bar sangs rgya'o: da ltar mthong ba ma 'gags par zang thal le gsal ba 'di ka ye shes zang thal gyi dgongs pa phyin ci ma log pa'i lta ba yin te: thig le gsal ba'i yang snying: rig pa chos kyi sku'i ngo bor cer kyi mthong ba yin: (sNyan brgyud thams cad kyi nang na yi ge med pa mthar thug pa: padma'i snyan brgyud) UR II: 445.*

¹⁶ *Rangi gi lag sor 'ja' tshon du gsal ba gsal ba la shes pa rtse gcig tu gtad na: phung po 'ja' tshon bzhin du grol 'gro'o: (Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sun du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po: padma'i snyan brgyud) UR II: 435.*

emptiness in the cessation of *dharmatā*, the fourth and last vision of direct transcendence, which highlights the tool-like nature of the visions. The final cessation of the visions is the supreme attainment of direct transcendence, which suggests that the state devoid of visions is higher than the visionary state. If this is the case, can the visionary manifestations actually describe the ultimate nature of reality, as indicated in the citation above? The key here is the concept of creativity (*rtsal*): the visionary manifestations are inherent in the *dharmakāya* awareness. It seems that the reality status of the visions is similar to a buddha's divine, luminous energy bodies, or *sambhogakāyas* ("body of bliss") that emanate from the *dharmakāya*. Ultimately, they are one with the *dharmakāya* due to the unity of the three bodies (*trikāya*). Thus, it makes sense to speak of the direct transcendence visions as a description of ultimate reality, and define seeing them as the correct view. This is also illustrated by the concept of self-display (*rang snang*), which is a visual description of the non-dual, empty nature of reality.¹⁷

The *Seminal Heart* philosophical ideas underlying direct transcendence visions resonate well with the Mahāyāna theory of the three bodies, but they are notably different from the typical Madhyamaka or Middle Way views. In Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, it is stated that the ultimate nature of reality is emptiness, which refers to the deconstruction of all assertions and constructions about reality.¹⁸ Nothing can be established as existent, non-existent, neither or both, so everything is empty. The Madhyamaka emptiness does not include awareness or perception as part of the ultimate, empty reality. Thus, the *rDzogs chen* portrayal of the ultimate nature of reality in terms of awareness and visual perception is in stark contrast with the Nāgārjunian view of ultimate reality as just emptiness, but bears resemblance to Yogācāra descriptions of enlightenment that contain cognitive aspects, i.e. various types of wisdom.¹⁹

¹⁷ It is notable that a later *rDzogs chen* scholar, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624) differs sharply from rGod ldem and Klong chen pa in his view on the dissolution of the visions in the cessation of *dharmatā*. According to Sog bzlog pa, it is only the structures of dualistic perception that cease in the fourth vision and one continues to see the pure visions of *maṇḍala* deities without clinging to them. His writings also suggest that this issue was a point of contention among Tibetan authors of his time. (See Gentry 2017: 210–216.)

¹⁸ For a translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, see *Nagarjuna's Middle Way* by Siderits and Katsura or *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* by Padmakara Translation Group.

¹⁹ For a doxographical discussion of wisdom in both the broader Buddhist tradition and Rongzompa's extant philosophical works, see Almogi 2009. For a more comprehensive treatment of Rongzompa's Great Perfection, see Rongzom 2017.

That being said, the views of Madhyamaka and the *Seminal Heart* are similar in the way they embrace the connectedness of all phenomena. The Madhyamaka's doctrine of emptiness amounts to interdependence, or the notion that all phenomena can arise, function, and cease only in an interrelated web of connections. All phenomena are connected and empty of inherent existence, so there is no dualism of subject and object. In the *Seminal Heart*, the non-duality of self and other is evident in the concept of self-display: ultimately all appearances of phenomenal objects are inseparable from oneself.

3. Liberation through wearing

The cycle of *The Liberation Through Wearing*²⁰ in the third volume of rGod ldem's anthology is quite different from the teachings on direct transcendence, but nevertheless contains notable parallels such as the idea of conspicuous sensory engagement for the purpose of attaining enlightenment. Similar to direct transcendence, the idea of liberation through wearing is also rooted in the *rDzogs chen* philosophy, specifically, in the possibility of accessing enlightenment simply and directly, in a manner reminiscent of Samantabhadra's recognition in the beginning of cosmogony.

The Liberation Through Wearing details the preparation of amulets to be worn, and contains tantras and mantras that are to be enclosed within the amulets. As the name *Liberation Through Wearing* suggests, the primary sense employed in the liberatory process is the sense of touch. Wearing the amulet under one's clothing on the skin transmits the liberating blessings. The idea of blessings transferred through touching is a common one in Tibetan religious culture. For example, a lama touches people to give blessings, and one touches sacred objects and scriptures with one's head to access the blessings they contain.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the concept of liberation through wearing is connected to other types of liberation through the senses that are often listed together as a group of four liberations (*grol ba bzhi*). The most renowned example is liberation through hearing (*thos grol*), found in Kar ma Gling pa's fourteenth century revelation, *The Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo* (*Bar do thos grol*), better known

²⁰ *bTags grol skor*, UR III:185–281. The cycle is augmented by five chapters in *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to this Great Tantra (an Explanatory Tantra)* (*rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btab pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud: bshad rgyud*) UR IV: 154–177.

as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This book is read to a dying person, a process that extends for a number of days after death; hearing the instructions is thought to present a possibility of liberation for the deceased.

Liberation through tasting (*myong grol*) involves ingesting sacred substances such as ritually produced pills that are distributed by lamas to devotees, or sometimes are made available for purchase in monasteries. Liberation through seeing (*mthong grol*) is generally not connected to direct transcendence in this context, but is associated with pilgrimage and the liberating effect of seeing sacred images or *stūpas* containing relics of accomplished masters. However, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan presents a rather radical argument that direct transcendence is a form of liberation through seeing, due to the power of the visions to disclose reality.²¹ Sometimes liberations through touching (*reg grol*) and sensing (*tshor grol*) or recollecting (*dran grol*) are added to the list, making a total of six liberations. The starting point for these liberations via the senses is in the Indian Buddhist ideas of the immense blessing power of the Buddha's relics, *stūpas* and other sacred objects, that are capable of imparting salvific effect upon contact. In Tibet, the idea of liberation through sensory contact started gaining currency in the twelfth century. A prominent example is the promotion of the enlightening power of Avalokiteśvara's six syllable mantra by Nyang rel Nyi ma 'od zer and later on by Guru Chos dbang.²²

In Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's anthology, the idea of liberation through wearing embodies the *rDzogs chen* possibility of spontaneous or automatic liberation (*sangs mi rgya ba'i dbang med*)²³ regardless of one's intellectual abilities or karmic baggage, through the blessing power of sacred amulets and texts. The idea of the buddha nature that is readily accessible via methods as basic as recognition is reflected in the possibility of becoming enlightened automatically upon wearing the amulets endowed with the liberating power of blessings. However, the liberation through wearing will not necessarily take place in this life. Instead, the texts frequently present

²¹ Gentry 2017: 186–206.

²² For the most in-depth analysis of the Indian and Tibetan roots of liberation through senses, see Gentry 2017: 171–290. In particular, for a discussion of liberation through tasting, see Gentry, 2017: 259–283 and 296–316. Note also Gentry's article in this same issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. In addition, for a discussion of liberation through tasting and seeing, see Gayley, 2007.

²³ *rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btap pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud: bshad rgyud*, UR IV: 155.

a disclaimer by stating that the liberating effect may only reach maturation in the *bardo* or the next life.²⁴

Similar to wearing the amulets, the scriptures they contain also have a liberating effect upon seeing or being heard, although these venues are much less accessible means to liberating blessings. The sacred tantras of the cycle are written with gold or other precious stones, covered in five kinds of silk, and then placed in a jewel amulet.²⁵ Thus, only educated practitioners of *The Unimpeded Realization* or specialists involved in making the amulets would be able to lay their eyes on the tantras of the *Liberation Through Wearing* before they are enclosed in an amulet.

The sense of hearing, however, has a prominent role in the famous *Prayer of Samantabhadra* (*Kun bzang smon lam*) originating from *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by Merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to This Great Tantra*. This tantra augments the *Liberation Through Wearing* cycle with five chapters that discuss the liberation through hearing, embedded in a larger explication of *Seminal Heart* philosophy and practice. *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* is the most widely available method to disseminate the liberatory power of the sacred letters contained in rGod ldem's anthology. In general, the tantras that liberate through wearing align themselves with the spontaneously liberating power of direct transcendence and ascribe the preparation of the amulets to *rDzogs chen* yogis. These tantras also state that the amulets should be given only to worthy recipients.²⁶ In contrast, *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by Merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to This Great Tantra* encourages the yogi to generate himself as Samantabhadra and recite *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* so that everyone can hear it—especially on auspicious days such as the time of solar and lunar eclipses, earth quakes, and the equinoxes. By merely hearing the prayer, all living beings of the three realms are said to attain enlightenment in three life times.²⁷

How are we to understand this eschatological power of *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* to enlighten all beings in the realms of samsara? The concept of attaining enlightenment within three lifetimes merely

²⁴ *The Tantra of the Single Son of all the Buddhas (the Liberation Through Wearing Cycle (Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig pu'i rgyud: btags grol skor)* UR III:214, *The Great Liberation Through Wearing (bTags grol chen po)* UR III: 234, and *The Exceedingly Profound Liberation through Wearing of the Nine Key points of Awareness (Rig pa gnad dgu'i btags grol shin tu zab pa)* UR III: 270.

²⁵ *The Tantra of the Single Son of all the Buddhas from the Liberation Through Wearing Cycle (Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig pu'i rgyud: btags grol skor)* UR III: 215–216.

²⁶ *The Great Liberation Through Wearing (bTags grol chen po)* UR III: 235.

²⁷ *rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btab pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud: bshad rgyud* UR III: 177.

through sensory engagement with sacred scriptures is a striking notion, especially when contrasted with the law of karma and its ubiquitous and unforgiving character. One could argue that the mere encounter with the amulets or *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* implies one's karmic readiness. This view is indeed mentioned in rGod ldem's anthology. *Supporting Notes on the Liberation Through Wearing* states that one has to have accumulated merit for eons to come across the teachings of the cycle.²⁸ Nevertheless, the liberating power of blessings in the sacred letters is conspicuous because what is promised is not merely a good rebirth or vast amounts of merit, but the unsurpassable enlightenment itself; and this status is assured even for a bird or deer who wears the amulet or hears the tantras recited.²⁹

4. Cosmogonic origins

That enlightenment is attainable in this way and possible even for animals highlights the tremendous blessing power of the *Liberation Through Wearing* texts. Where does the liberating power of the scriptures and amulets come from? It originates from the primordial manifestations of wisdom arising in the first moments of cosmogonic play. Although seeing and hearing are less important venues for transmitting the blessings of the sacred tantras, these senses have a crucial role in the cosmogonic narratives that relate the source of the liberating power of the amulets and tantras. The cosmogonic narratives in rGod ldem's anthology describe the initial manifestation of appearances (*gzhi snang*) from the empty, indeterminate universal ground (*kun gzhi*).³⁰ The first being to emerge, Samantabhadra, sees these visions of brilliant luminous displays and hears roaring sounds. Without fear or grasping, he recognizes the sensory manifestations as a self-display not external to himself, and attains enlightenment.

²⁸ *Supporting Notes on the Liberation through Wearing of the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection: Notes on the Key Points That Unravel the Secret Key Points* (Yang gsang bla na med pa'i rdzogs pa chen po'i btags grol rgyab yig gsang ba'i gnad bkrol gnad kyi yi ge'i them yig rnam) UR III: 256.

²⁹ *The Tantra of the Single Son of all the Buddhas (the Liberation Through Wearing Cycle)* (Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig pu'i rgyud: btags grol skor) UR III: 213, 215.

³⁰ In rGod ldem's anthology, the primordial ground of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is usually called the universal ground (*kun gzhi*), while in many other *rDzogs chen* texts such as Klong chen pa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings* it is called the ground (*gzhi*) and the universal ground refers to the universal ground consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*) or the individual ground of karmic imprints in each sentient being.

In addition to the standard cosmogonic stories, rGod ldem's anthology contains two distinctive narratives in the *Liberation Through Wearing* cycle. The first one, *The Precious Liberation Through Seeing*, has a notable emphasis (despite its title) on the sense of hearing in the awakening of the Primordial Buddha. In this narrative, Samantabhadra hears roaring, thundering sounds and sees dark, shaking visual appearances similar to the terrifying sounds and lights in the *bardo*. However, he has no fear of the sounds or lights, but maintains naked awareness "embracing the essence of sound,"³¹ which causes the auditory manifestations to be recognized as the self-arisen, primordial sounds: 'a, a, sha, sa, ma, ha. These six syllables, symbolize the natural state in *rDzogs chen*, are the same ones given to people to concentrate on due to their power to clear the mind.³²

Samantabhadra's enlightenment is significant in the context of *Liberation Through Wearing* for three reasons. It is the first instance of the *rDzogs chen* idea of spontaneous liberation, a liberation through mere recognition, which underlies the concept of attaining enlightenment automatically through wearing amulets, regardless of intelligence and karmic standing. Samantabhadra's enlightenment is also the first occasion of liberation through seeing and hearing, although the senses here work as instruments, not the main cause of liberation as with liberatory tantras. In cosmogonic manifestation, Samantabhadra sees and hears the visions, but it is the recognition that brings about enlightenment. The relationship of the recognition as the cause and senses as instruments is similar to the link between cause (*rgyu*) and condition (*rkyen*) in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. In contrast, when a person lays his eyes on a liberatory tantra or hears it recited, it is the very act of sensory perception that has a liberating effect, although it draws its power from the cosmogonic connection and Samantabhadra's primordial recognition. Thirdly, Samantabhadra's enlightenment is significant because it is directly related to the emergence of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras, as they are literally said to arise out of the cosmogonic play.

The appearance of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras is explained in another cosmogonic narrative distinctive to rGod ldem's anthology, *The Pith Instruction of the Glorious Samantabhadra: The Way the Liberation Through Wearing Emerges*. This text connects the origin of the *Liberation Through Wearing* to the primordial manifestation of sacred sounds from enlightened deities. After Samantabhadra attains

³¹ *sGra'i snying po dril bas*: (*Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po mthong grol rin po che*) UR III: 275.

³² *Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po mthong grol rin po che*, UR III: 275–276. For a more detailed explanation of cosmogony in *The Unimpeded Realization*, see Turpeinen 2018: 141–144.

enlightenment, he emanates the peaceful and wrathful deities. Self-resounding sound arises from their enlightened bodies in the form of the syllables Om̐, Āḥ and Hūṃ. Other letters arise from the three syllables, and twenty-one *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras manifest from Vajradhara's enlightened mind.³³

These two distinctive cosmogonic narratives, *The Precious Liberation Through Seeing* and *The Pith Instruction of the Glorious Samantabhadra*, explain the extraordinary power of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras. *The Precious Liberation Through Seeing* narrates Samantabhadra's enlightenment in connection to sacred sounds or letters, the building blocks of scriptures. The theme of sacred sounds continues in *The Pith Instruction of the Glorious Samantabhadra* which dates the emergence of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras all the way back to the primordial moments of cosmogony when the first sounds emanated out of Samantabhadra's manifestations. The tantras arose from the enlightened mind of Vajradhara who is said to be Samantabhadra's emanation, so they are a projection of Samantabhadra's primordial recognition infused with his blessings and compassionate intention to help future sentient beings. Endowed with such power, the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras can enlighten living beings merely upon being worn, seen, or heard. In addition, the liberation through visual and auditory perceptions is analogous to Samantabhadra's liberation upon seeing and hearing the primordial play of sounds and forms. This analogy is intentionally evoked by the cosmogonic narratives in rGod Idem's anthology in order to explain the liberatory power of the scriptures contained in the amulets.

5. Conclusion

The examination of the senses in the practice of direct transcendence and liberation through wearing has illustrated the close connection between these two practices. Not only do both practices apply the senses as instruments for liberation, but they are also philosophically grounded in the possibility of spontaneous liberation as exemplified in Samantabhadra's recognition of the cosmogonic visions and sounds as self-display. Direct transcendence describes a venue of non-dual perception based on an alternative wisdom network of seeing, while liberation through wearing incarnates this possibility of spontaneous liberation by turning it into sacred material culture in the form of amulets and scriptures accessible through sight, hearing, and touch.

³³ *dPal kun tu bzang po'i man ngag: btags grol byon tshul*, UR III:205–208.

The role of the senses in the practices of direct transcendence and liberation through wearing illustrates the radically different view on sensory perception in the Tibetan *rDzogs chen* and the Indian philosophical schools of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. While these philosophical schools generally view sensory perception as tainted by dualism and perpetuating the illusion of ordinary existence, the *rDzogs chen* tradition utilizes various senses as tools to attain enlightenment. The *rDzogs chen* view celebrates the liberatory possibilities of sensory perception and carefully undergirds these possibilities in creative philosophical ideas, alternative physiological structures, and narratives of Samantabhadra's enlightenment in the first moments of cosmogony.

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